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The Church, Persecuted and Grateful
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In the United States, Bible verses dot the billboard landscape. “In God We Trust” is on our coins, and politicians fall all over themselves to insert “God Bless America” in even the most mundane public addresses. 40-45% of Americans insist that they attended church the previous Sunday; that perhaps half of these folks are not telling the truth suggests the “social capital” that apparently accrues to churchgoing. Most important, perhaps, the Christian Right is the single most important constituency in one of the nation’s two major political parties, and as the campaign for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination continues its frenzied and crazy course all of the candidates find themselves genuflecting to the Evangelical powers-that-be (and as one side effect, not one of these candidates will affirm that they believe in evolution).

On the face of it, then, the question “Are American Christians Persecuted?” is ludicrous. And yet, Dr. Kennedy is absolutely right to address this question in his sermon. A very large number of evangelicals and a good number of mainline Protestants and Catholics have been persuaded that laws and policies that reflect America’s religious pluralism and that are designed to protect religious minorities are actually aimed to restrict the “religious freedom” of Christians. They have been convinced that there really is a governmental and cultural “War on Christmas” (a charge that, interestingly, first surfaced in the early 1920s, when the rabidly anti-Semitic Henry Ford proclaimed that Jews had conspired to remove references to Jesus from Christmas cards). They have even been frightened into believing that – as the Creation Museum’s Ken Ham claims – the day is near when we will see “the outlawing of Christianity” in America.

In response to this ideologically-driven nonsense Kennedy bluntly and rightly asserts that “spoiled, pampered, soft American Christians growling about their rights” know nothing of what it means to be truly persecuted. Christians in the US may on occasion be criticized on the grounds of their faith commitments; they may feel disdain from secular elites who associate Christianity

with ignorance; they may have a sense of unease over the fact that Christian cultural hegemony is fading. But none of this constitutes persecution. In a brilliant and humorous rhetorical move that both clinches the case and invites congregants to hear what he is saying, Kennedy includes himself and his fellow preachers in the category of the soft and pampered, pointing out that “we have housing allowances, tax exemptions, and invitations to all the right social events, especially if a prayer is needed.”

In short, and despite the confines of a 20-minute sermon, Kennedy dismantles the false narrative that American Christians are enduring persecution. Persuading Christians who have enjoyed and still enjoy “majority privileges” in the United States that they are not “victims” is important work. But what gives Kennedy’s sermon real power is that, in his reference to John the Baptist and the 16th-century Anabaptists and the twenty-eight nations where Christians are persecuted today, he suggests the possibility that authentic Christianity will never be a “majority” religion, that authentic Christianity exists on the margins and in the shadows. That is to say, to truly follow Jesus is to invite persecution, as the Jesus message is always at odds with the powers-that-be.

This is important Gospel work, and in its emphasis on rejecting violence and loving one’s enemies, it is certainly at odds with the culture, both American culture and much of American Christian culture. More than this, and again in the confines of a 20-minute sermon, he presents his case directly and powerfully. This said, this sermon – and here comes special pleading from the historian – could have been even stronger if Kennedy had done even more to root it in the history of the church. He points out that early Christians were “a people on the run and under the gun,” but this point could have made much more vivid with reference to early Christian martyrs; for example, to include specific reference to the 3rd-century imprisonment and killing of Perpetua and Felicity in north Africa – a story so powerful that it was read annually in churches of the region – would confront 21st-century Americans with two women (one noble, one a slave) who refused to renounce their Christian faith and instead peacefully, even joyfully, accepted their

violent deaths. While Kennedy makes good use of Will Campbell's novella, *Cecilia's Sin*, which provides a compelling account of Anabaptists preparing for martyrdom, the historical account of the 1527 trial, torture, and burning of Michael Sattler (followed by the drowning of his wife, Margaretha) could provide an even more powerful example as to what happens when Christians refuse to endorse the state's use of violence and who, as the memorial plaque at the execution site states, died in behalf of "the peaceful message of the Sermon on the Mount." And given the recent anti-Muslim hysteria in the United States, there would be real power in relating the story of the French Trappist monks in Algeria (dramatized in the film "Of Gods and Men") who were killed in 1996 by Islamic militants (or, the Algerian army) because they refused to leave Algeria and thus abandon their Muslim neighbors.

Given how poorly-versed American Christians are in church history, I cannot help but wonder if historical examples of persecution and martyrdom might make even more compelling the call to serve as witnesses to Jesus' work on the Cross. The stories of Perpetua and Felicity, Michael and Margaretha Sattler, and the Trappist monks in Algeria (and many, many more like them) corroborate Kennedy's remarkable statement near the end of this powerful sermon, that "the spirit of Jesus' people toward persecution is one of submission, thanksgiving, and gratitude, and this is what people schooled in the ways of the majority can't comprehend." Amen, and amen.